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Iraqi Kurdistan – the beginning of a new crisis in the Middle East?

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Against the backdrop of the ongoing dismantling of Islamic State (IS) and the preparations for the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan scheduled for 25 September, Iraq as a whole is facing a new conflict which is likely to result in a thorough revision of the present balance of power in this part of the Middle East. A serious risk has emerged that the conflict may rapidly escalate, and its consequences may be more serious for the Middle East and Europe than the fight against Islamic State.

Iraq following the dismantling of Islamic State

The underlying reason for the change of the situation in northern Iraq has been the ongoing dismantling of Islamic State in the region which is being carried out by Iraqi government forces supported by Shia militias (Hashd al-Shabi), Iranian forces and other actors, including the USA (mainly air operations) and Kurdish forces, Sunni units etc. The recapture on 9 July of Mosul, one of IS's capitals and Iraq's second largest city, was a major breakthrough in the fight against Islamic State¹. At the same time in Syria, the operation to recapture Raqqa, the capital of IS, has been advancing. Both in Iraq and in Syria, Islamic State now controls only isolated points² and although it is certain that – just like in the past – IS will be able to reorganise itself quickly and rise again, the dismantling of its parastate structures is shaping a brand new political reality in the region.

¹ For more see: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2017-07-12/consequences-recapturing-mosul-islamic-state>

² Aside from Raqqa, these include four big cities inhabited by several hundred thousand people: in Iraq, Tal Afar to the west of Mosul, Hawija to the south-west of Kirkuk and Al-Qa'im close to the Syrian border; and in Syria, Deir ez-Zor in the eastern part of the country.

For Iraq, the dismantling of IS is tantamount to a political victory for the authorities in Baghdad. More generally, it means the victory by the Shia camp which – aside from the government forces – includes the increasingly stronger Shia militias, which are only formally dependent on the government. Both the authorities in Baghdad and the Shia militias are largely dependent on, controlled by and strategically managed by Iran, and their success is mainly a success for Iran, achieved on a regional scale. One important consequence of the Shia forces recapturing northern Iraq is the apparently long-term elimination of the Arab Sunni camp as an actor in Iraqi politics. The process of marginalising the Sunnis has been ongoing since 2003. The deep leadership crisis within Iraqi Sunni groups which has been evident in recent years, coupled with mass-scale support from the Sunnis for IS (even if this support was forced) at present discredits this group as an actor on the Iraqi political scene and has resulted in a brutal pacification of the region (involving numerous war crimes³) carried out mainly by Shia militias. It has also provoked refugee migrations,

³ For example <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia> and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/01/iraq-end-irresponsible-arms-transfers-fuelling-militia-war-crimes/>

which pose the risk of a durable shift in the confessional structure of Iraq. Finally, it entails the risk of another wave of terrorism. At the same time, the marginalisation of Arab Sunnis is a strategic failure for Turkey. Since at least 2009 (and in particular since the Arab Spring), Turkey has attempted to fulfil its huge political ambitions in the region (Iraq, Syria) which it grounded precisely on this group.

The significant empowerment of the Shia camp in Iraq, the marginalisation of the Sunnis as an element to counterbalance/absorb Iraqi Shias across the country, and finally the dismantling of IS that will likely result in a temporary drop in the USA's involvement in the region all pose a major threat to the very existence and development of the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq (KRG, the acronym for Kurdistan Regional Government).

A significant rise in the position of the Shia camp in Iraq poses a major threat to the existence and development of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Since 2003, the KRG has been developing with some success (the process was not stopped by the Iraqi authorities' curbing the KRG's state budget subsidies in 2014, a move which went against the Iraqi constitution); it has continued to build its partner status in its relations with Baghdad, and has used the government's failures in its battle against IS as an opportunity to seize several disputed areas, Kirkuk in particular, and to take over several oil fields (in 2014 and 2017). Another important factor solidifying the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan is its close economic and political cooperation with Turkey. Unlike the terrorist anti-Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party – PKK (which is also active in Syria under the name of the PYD), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) under Masoud Barzani, which at present rules Iraqi Kurdistan, is Ankara's 'junior partner'. It profits from economic cooperation

with Turkey and enjoys military⁴ and political⁵ support from Turkey.

At present, the KRG leadership is aware of the rise in Baghdad's power and its readiness to limit/dissolve the Kurdish autonomous region by all possible means (economic, political, and finally – similarly to the rest of the country – military). In this situation, the authorities in Irbil decided to hold an independence referendum (scheduled for 25 September), and then to launch a quick process to gain independence which would be recognised internationally.

Iraqi Kurdistan ahead of the independence referendum

The referendum initiative was put forward by KRG's President Masoud Barzani (who alongside his family has been the *de facto* leader of Iraq's Kurds for decades). It is being implemented mainly via the structures of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, whose leader he is. According to Kurds, the political motivation behind the referendum initiative is Baghdad's striking and permanent failure to meet its constitutional obligations towards the KRG⁶, which is another instance of Iraq's century-long brutal violation of the rights of Kurds. Moreover, it is frequently emphasised that unlike Iraq the KRG is a stable, safe and (relatively) democratic political organism which is free from internal conflicts, and as such is a much-desired element fostering the region's stabilisation. The referendum itself is being prepared in an

⁴ For example the Turkish military base in Bashiqa west of Irbil. From this base, Turkish forces provided artillery support to Kurdish Peshmerga fighting against IS, and trained Kurdish and Sunni forces.

⁵ For example numerous visits by President Masoud Barzani and Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani to Turkey, including their meetings with President Erdoğan. <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/51037/irak-kurt-bolgesel-yoneti-mi-baskani-barzani-cumhurbaskanligi-kulliyesinde.html>, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/74996/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-ikby-basbakani-barzaniyi-kabul-etti.html>

⁶ For example in 2007, which was the deadline set in the constitution for holding a referendum regarding the disputed areas (article 140 of the Iraqi constitution), including Kirkuk; since 2014 Baghdad has no longer paid the subsidies due to the KRG's budget.

extremely hasty manner, and with awareness of organisational deficiencies: by late July 2017 there was still no official confirmation as to the wording of the referendum question (most likely there will be one common question for the whole of the KRG regarding independence,

Close economic, political and military cooperation with Turkey is an important factor strengthening the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan.

with no separate question regarding the disputed areas and their official status as parts of Kurdistan or Iraq); other vague issues include polling stations, electoral committees and unbiased/foreign observers etc. In line with the decision by the authorities in Irbil, the referendum will be held regardless of all these problems, and will result in the process of negotiations with Baghdad being launched; this is planned to last between one year and 18 months, and to obligatorily culminate in Kurdistan declaring independence. Barzani's team is decisively and credibly denying any pan-Kurdish ambitions on the part of Iraqi Kurdistan⁷.

The referendum has become the catalyst of a new phase of tensions within the KRG itself. Without openly denying the independence ambitions, the opposition parties (Goran and Islamic parties) are against the referendum; the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is the second most influential party in the KRG, sees it as an opportunity to continue its political fight against the PDK. The reasons behind this objection are: the fear that the political scene may become completely dominated by the PDK, the referendum's initiator; and the strong political and economic ties between Iran and

the southern part of the KRG, which has been a traditional bastion of the PUK, Goran and other opposition forces. From Goran's point of view, the formal condition for its support of the referendum is that parliament should resume its operation, which was suspended in 2015. Talks on this issue have been ongoing; one solution may involve parliamentary and presidential elections announced in early July and scheduled for 1 November 2017⁸. Alongside the opposition's political calculations, objections towards independence result from fears of a new conflict and a further deterioration in living standards (these have deteriorated due to the halt in federal subsidies, the drop in oil prices, the consequences of the fight against IS, including taking up to 2 million refugees and internally displaced persons into the KRG⁹; the independence option poses the risk of an economic blockade on the part of Iran and Iraq which would affect the southern part of the Kurdish autonomous region in particular). Taking account of all these circumstances, it is assumed that the vast majority of Kurds will support Kurdistan's independence¹⁰, with support likely to be the highest in the northern part of the Kurdish autonomous region (which is the bastion of the Barzanis, near to Turkey, and has weak links with Baghdad), and relatively lowest (although local experts still expect it to be as high as 60%) in the south (which has closer ties to Iran and Baghdad, and whose stronger political opposition is traditionally linked to Iran).

⁸ <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/190720174>

⁹ At present, according to official statistics the KRG is home to 233,000 refugees (mainly from Syria) and over 1.5 million internally displaced persons from Iraq. Data from JCC KRG, available at <http://www.jcckr.org/contents/reports/22-06-2017/1498140265.IDPs%20and%20refugees%20in%20Kurdistan%20Region-%20Update%2020%20June%202017%20English.pdf>

¹⁰ The upcoming referendum is not the first of its kind; in January 2005 a non-binding independence referendum was held in the KRG and in some of the disputed areas (at that time it was an element for putting pressure on Baghdad in connection with the work on the constitution), in which 98.88% of the voters voted in favour of independence for Iraqi Kurdistan.

⁷ There is strong awareness of real and deep differences between the Iraqi and the Turkish, the Iranian and the Syrian parts of Kurdistan, which rule out its unification. This concerns political and tribal differences, as well as linguistic (separate dialects written in different alphabets), cultural and religious differences.

The referendum and the risk of a regional conflict

The referendum project has met with sharp criticism from Baghdad and Tehran, moderate objection on the part of Turkey, and an extremely restrained reaction from Western states and Russia, which officially support Iraq's unity.

The attitude of Baghdad and Tehran towards the referendum in the KRG is tantamount to their readiness to launch hostile actions against the authorities in Irbil.

In the case of Western states this reaction has mainly been motivated by their fear of Iraq's destabilisation and bolstered by their dislike of secessionist tendencies as such, whereas in the case of Turkey the reaction was intended as an element of a bargaining strategy in its relations with Irbil (undoubtedly one component of this strategy is Turkey's willingness to ensure special rights for the Turkmen minority in Kirkuk). On the other hand, the attitude of Baghdad and Tehran equates with their readiness to launch hostile actions targeting the authorities in Irbil. At present, these include attempts to politically discredit the referendum initiative on the international stage and to fuel the political dispute within the KRG (by supporting the opposition). Irbil has to pay heed to the possible, Iranian-inspired increase in the escalation of tensions, as well as sabotage, terrorist and military actions carried out by Islamic forces¹¹, the PKK (which has a military presence in Qandil in north-eastern Kurdistan,

in Kirkuk and Sinjar)¹², and also possibly by (a part of) the PUK forces¹³. What Irbil views as a potential option is the possible cooperation between Baghdad and the IS forces operating in the area around the city of Hawija (c. 20 km from Kirkuk); Baghdad is not only failing to take action against them, but is also suspected of providing them with arms, and intending to provoke them to attack Kirkuk in order to destabilise the city and disrupt/discredit the referendum in a city of key importance for Kurds. In the present dynamic, a scenario involving Shia militias attacking the KRG seems likely (there have been numerous incidents between Peshmerga and Hashd al-Shabi), and may ultimately lead to a conflict between Kurdish and Iraqi (possibly even Iranian) forces.

Despite their sharp awareness of the challenges and risks connected with their ambitions for independence, the authorities in Irbil argue that the KRG/PDK abandoning the path to independence should be ruled out; there is an awareness of the opportunity escaping, combined with emotional self-assurance. The leadership of Iraqi Kurdistan believes that reaching a compromise with the opposition, the PUK in particular, is possible; moreover there is a widespread conviction that the Peshmerga are strong enough to defend themselves against Iraq, and that Kurdistan is an attractive refuge for religious minorities in Iraq. Against this backdrop, attempts are being made to create autonomous administration units for religious minorities (Christians, Yazidis, Ahl-e Haqq)¹⁴, and also possibly for Sunnis in northern Iraq. So far, the KRG

¹¹ Radical Islamic ideas, although they are relatively unpopular, are present in the KRG; several hundred Kurds have fought in the ranks of IS, and Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish Salafi terrorist organisation, had previously fought against Peshmerga and American forces in Iraq.

¹² Although the PKK has officially expressed its support for the referendum initiative in the KRG, the KRG's independence would in fact pose a threat to the PKK. Relations between these groups are tense, and in Sinjar members of these two groups have even been involved in military clashes against each other.

¹³ In the past, the rivalry between the PDK and the PUK had resulted in civil war in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1994–1997.

¹⁴ For example <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/43b3522c-32e1-413f-97d1-3f9bba16b10a/christians-support-referendum--want-autonomy-in-kurdistan>

has supported these groups forming militias to fight against IS; they could also potentially serve as a buffer in the conflict with Baghdad. Taking account of the unique nature of the crisis in the Middle East and of Kurdistan itself,

There are serious reasons prompting the view that a possible military conflict affecting Iraqi Kurdistan would quickly flare up on a scale exceeding that of the civil war in Syria.

the present tensions pose a risk of increased involvement by external actors. Iran's effectiveness in strengthening its position in the region (including in Iraq), in a situation of political marginalisation and the ongoing radicalisation of the Sunni element, has triggered serious concern among Tehran's regional opponents, from Israel and Saudi Arabia to Turkey. In practice, this would position them as potential allies of the authorities in Irbil. On the other hand, both the present conflicts in the region and the historical experiences of the Kurdish people themselves (including the Iraqi Kurds) suggest that the risk of effective management of internal tensions by all external actors is high. In this case – just like in the past – it can be assumed that openly pro-Baghdad and pro-Iranian forces may emerge among the Iraqi Kurds, or forces which would seek support from them to use in their own interest (paradoxically these could, for example, be religious/extreme Sunni Kurdish groups competing mainly with Kurdish nationalists).

Conclusions and prospects

The situation around Iraqi Kurdistan is very likely to result in tensions within the KRG (along the north-south axis within the autonomous region), a sharp conflict between the KRG and Iraq (with special emphasis on Kirkuk), and fi-

nally a conflict which would involve various regional powers to varying degrees (Iran, Turkey, and also Israel and Saudi Arabia) as well as trans-regional powers (the USA, Russia). The ultimate stake in this conflict would be the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, tantamount to a break-up of Iraq, vs. the dissolution of the Kurdish autonomous region and the reintegration of an Iraq which would be dominated by Shias/Iran. Either of these options would be a precedent of major importance for present and future conflicts in the Middle East. This conflict would be tantamount to an escalation of a proxy war between Iran and Turkey. In the eyes of both these states, Iraq (for Turkey Iraqi Kurdistan, which is its ally and client) embodies their greatest successes in Middle Eastern politics, the stake in this conflict provokes the risk of escalation of actions on both sides. In the present situation, Baghdad/Tehran¹⁵ seems to be the decidedly stronger side; however, this is not an inevitable option for the future. Nevertheless, the future of Iraqi Kurdistan, the only manifestation of the processes of stabilisation and modernisation in recent decades, remains an open question, especially against the backdrop of its increasingly chaotic surrounding. It is highly likely that the USA (followed by its allies) will become involved in the conflict, since it is concerned by the region's destabilisation, and in particular by Iran's increasingly strong position. The USA's increased involvement may result in greater involvement by Russia as well. Moscow intention would be not so much to back either of the parties to the conflict, but rather to demonstrate its role as a state able to manage the dynamics of such conflicts, and as a necessary participant in the process of resolving these conflicts. One factor which significantly complicates the situation as a whole has been the fact that the challenges regarding

¹⁵ For example, the successful marginalisation of Sunnis all over Iraq, successful regional initiatives; the 'negative', i.e. erosion-oriented plan towards Kurdistan.

the future of Iraq and Kurdistan form elements of a broader crisis affecting the Middle East as a whole. This crisis includes the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, and more generally the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is most evident in the Persian Gulf region. The latter may potentially fuel tensions in Iraq itself¹⁶.

There are serious reasons prompting the view that a possible military conflict affecting Iraqi Kurdistan would quickly flare up on a scale exceeding that of the civil war in Syria. It should be noted that at present the Peshmerga forces of the PDK and the PUK include more than 240,000 soldiers, Hashd al-Shabi has around 140,000 and the Iraqi army 270,000 declared, whereas the total number of troops presently involved in the war in Syria, including the government, opposition, Islamic and Kurdish etc. forces, is no more than 300,000 soldiers

and fighters. Should a conflict around the KRG emerge, an increase in the number and radicalisation of the armed forces should be expected, including the emergence of radical Sunni groups which in turn would pose a terrorist threat (just like in Syria and in the previous stages of the war in Iraq). Finally, similar to the conflict in Syria, there is a serious risk of a new phase of the migration crisis: the population of Iraqi Kurdistan is estimated at 5.3 million individuals, and the region also has more than 233,000 refugees from Syria and 1.5 million Iraqi internally displaced persons (at present a return of these two groups to their homelands should be ruled out). In case of such a conflict, migration waves provoked both by crackdowns on the civil population (carried out on a mass scale by Shia militias) and by the continued deterioration of living standards should be expected.

¹⁶ Including within the Shia camp itself, which is not homogenous, as evidenced by the visit by the Shia cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr to Saudi Arabia in late July 2017 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/07/30/Muqtada-al-Sadr-in-Saudi-Arabia-for-the-first-time-in-11-years-.html>

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